

Interview with
Vito Acconci and Steven Holl
by Claudia Gould

Claudia Gould: Being invited by Storefront to curate this project has been like being asked to organize a dinner where the main ingredients had already been selected. It's a bit unclear what my role should be or should have been. Rumor has it that the two of you put yourselves together 1. True, and -- if so, how did it happen?

Vito Acconci: We started a project together In 1988, in Washington DC. It was ill-fated --we never got to a real design phase. We started to have ideas together, but we never really got to work out a design together.

Steven Holl: We had a concept and we had a huge site -- the site in front of the National Portrait Gallery -- in the heart of downtown at Seventh Ave Northwest.

CG: What were you asked to do?

VA: To make what they called an "art walk." The site was an L-shaped area of seven blocks. They were probably asking us to "adorn" the area; what we wanted to do was "organize" it. In either case, we were being asked to deal with landscape, cityscape -- sidewalks and streets -- not buildings.

SH: We produced a tiny document as a conceptual strategy for an urban experience. It was called "A Space Above, A Space Through and A Space Below."

VA: Separately, we made sketches for different areas: We jotted down general design ideas. They saw what we had and accused us of deconstructing Washington.

CG: How had you come together then, how did you know each other?

SH: When I first came to New York in 1976-77, Vito was very much in the spotlight. I went to Anthology Film Archives to see a screening of his videos. Vito, I was sitting in the front row watching you pace back and forth. Afterwards I went up to you, very informally, and asked if you had ever collaborated with an architect. Do you remember?

VA: No.

SH: I remember -- both of your shoes were untied (all laughing). I said maybe, some day, we could work together.

CG: What made you decide to be an architect?

SH: As an undergraduate student of architecture, I studied painting and drawing in the art school. I loved the interaction there and considered dropping out of architecture for art. When I came to New York I had a very good idea about what was going on in the art world, I knew all of Vito's work, and was also interested in Dennis Oppenheim's work.

CG: It's interesting that you had considered being a painter. Steven, I don't see any schism in your wanting to be a painter, with the sort of work you do as an architect. I see more of a schism in Vito's relationship to architecture. Do you want to be an architect, Vito?

VA: I see what I am doing as architecture and not art. I spend more time with architects than with artists.

CG: Vito, for years you have been gracefully moving between mediums: Writing, performance, video, film, and sculpture. In 1980 you made High Rise -- a plastic building; In 1981 Peeling House, also of plastic. You seem schizophrenic or maybe multophrenic! I don't feel that from you, Steven.

VA: I don't know about "grace;" the movement was more agonized than that. I got to the end of one phase, got to a dead end, and then I had to get out, meandered over to another phase. I think of myself as doing architecture or, at least, something like architecture. Maybe this caused some of the problems with the collaboration; each of our roles were not distinct enough.

CG: Why do you wish you were an architect?

VA: Art as we know it -- museum art, gallery art -- it's a closed system with its own rules.

CG: The world of architecture seems even more closed or perhaps more academic. An artist is encouraged to break ground, to do anything and be anything. Art offers complete freedom for work and for an artist's identity. I agree that the orthodox art world epitomizes a closed and private system.

VA: Sure, as an artist, you can do anything you want because its protected by the art world, and isolated inside the art world, whereas architecture exists in the middle of other worlds: You walk down the street and you're walking through architecture. No matter what you do, you're in an architecture as you do it, you're being influenced by that architecture as you do it. Architecture is part of the everyday world with everyday rules. After working for so many years, in museums and galleries, I welcome restrictions like: "You have to put up a railing here." I might not want to put up a railing, but now, I have to find a way to have a railing that doesn't announce itself as a railing -- I'm forced into ingenuity.

CG: So you see architecture as not having the same pretension as art?

VA: The pretension of art comes from its closure: Its realm is "pure" art whereas architecture, by its nature, is applied art -- even as theory, it has to be applied to other worlds in order to exist. The art world is complete in itself: It has its own agents, its own receivers, its own distribution system; it's self-supportive and self-sustaining. It demands belief, like religion; if there's doubt, the system collapses.

CG: Yes, I understand the differences in terms of the world with regard to architecture, the systems of each etc. However architecture is big stakes; permanence (for the most part) instead of the ephemera of art. The "architecture world" is about as closed and lethal as they come; much heavier than the art world could ever be. I will step lightly here, it is simply my feeling as an outsider looking in.

SH: I don't think it is quite the same. Architects can agree and they can publish in a certain set of magazines but, in the end, if it isn't built it does not exist as an experience for others. The history of architecture is a part of the environment of the time, which is rather exciting. Go to Vicenza and look at Palladio's buildings. He speaks through these buildings and these spaces. The real speaking is of space and the material. Once something is built, it is there, it is part of the experience

VA: When you enter a museum or a gallery you're, in effect, saying: "I am an art viewer"-- by extension, you're separating yourself from the "others," from those who are not viewers. When you are walking through a doorway, or climbing up a stairway -- whether or not you know anything about theories of architecture, conventions of architecture -- you're an architecture user, just like anybody else, and you're influenced by that architecture; you're a victim of that architecture, just like anybody else.

SH: I asked a cab driver to name his favorite building in New York. He liked the Guggenheim but didn't know about the inside, "...those bed springs they have on the floor." He doesn't understand the art and, therefore, won't go into the building. Vito and I agree that the Storefront project should penetrate that barrier. When you enter Storefront you still think, "I am an art viewer. I am going to open the door and go in". That's the difference between what's happening on the street and what is happening inside; there are two worlds. The interesting moment is when worlds spill over and mix. Vito and I shared an interest in breaking down, destroying, or interacting with the kind of wall between the two worlds. The project has an energy that addresses public and private space.

VA: We wanted the Storefront as a building, as a place, to be part of the city. You wouldn't have to go in, you could get something from the outside, you'd have something to use on the outside.

CG: Steven, let's go back to my perception that you are content as an architect. I never felt that you were trying to be an artist.

SH: I build ideas and that is what an artist does. To build fantasies excites me. To have an idea, like the Helsinki Museum Project, with an idea that you can't find the end of. This is a fantasy and an art project.

CG: Your art is in the form of architecture and I am saying Vito is a visual artist-thinker, who wants to be an architect.

VA: When you say "architecture" you're describing a specific field, but the word "art" is problematic; it's an evaluative word -- it doesn't just describe something, it justifies something, and glorifies something. When I'm collaborating with an architect, either one of us might be doing art.

CG: What is interesting about your work together is that the roles are not defined. How has this project challenged your notions of collaboration? Better yet, what is collaboration?

VA: Both of us wanted a working method in which one set of ideas collided with the other, maybe, sometimes combined with the other: In the end it should be impossible to say whose part is whose.

CG: I witnessed the collision, but tell me, how did your ideas combine?

SH: The process was enormously draining, in a sense, that made it unpredictable.

VA: It was different in Washington -- maybe because we never got to an actual design; we only got to theories of design.

CG: That can make a tremendous difference. Conceptualization is certainly easier than construction.

SH: What we had in Washington was a conceptual structure for an urban position in space -- an attitude to unify a series of different ideas. There was an urban concept and we were doing detail concepts for each locale. I can imagine how this project would have developed. For Storefront we had thousands of self-canceling ideas. Vito would go away and I would go away and we would come back together and it would go on like this (gesturing with arms, as if going in two different directions.)

VA: Compared to Washington, Storefront was agonizing.

SH: In my experience, working on different projects, there is no sure method. An idea starts to evolve and then it takes off. There is no way to know how long it will take to come up with an idea. I can tell you how long working drawings will take but, until there is an idea, the work is extremely difficult. Sometimes the idea can happen in twenty-four hours, or not at all.

CG: Steven, you have said, "A conceptual idea can drive a decision." We all agree on that. Would you describe how the conceptual idea steered your decisions in creating Storefront?

SH: Storefront was like "bumper ideas," Vito and I were supposed to be riding in the same car, but we had different cars. Every time our cars came together, we careered off in different directions.

CG: Let's talk about creating a facade. By definition, a facade is the face of a building or an artificial or deceptive front -- the public side of a private space. A facade also lends identity to a building. Does your work fall within these definitions? Have you constructed a deceptive front? Have you given a new identity to the Storefront for Art and Architecture?

SH: All of my buildings struggle against the idea of a facade. If you are building something, that has a concept or meaning, the first thing you want is to get beyond some kind of a front. Robert Venturi wrote a manifesto about the decorated shed. The idea of a false front is something he embraces and works with. I work to permeate the entirety of the space with the material and the detail of a conceptual strategy; I am trying to work deeper than facade.

CG: Certainly Storefront goes much deeper than a false front but what you have created is still, by definition, a facade.

SH: There is no facade -- when it is open, it is gone. That is the beauty of the piece. I like Kyong Park's statement: "NO WALL, NO BARRIER, NO INSIDE, NO OUTSIDE, NO SPACE, NO BUILDING, NO PLACE, NO INSTITUTION, NO ART, NO ARCHITECTURE, NO ACCONCI, NO HOLL, NO STOREFRONT." That is a position without a facade.

VA: What I like is that this facade is not a cover, not a surface - it's a space-maker; it's an instrument between the inside and the outside; it can make spaces inside and outside.

CG: Would you have done it differently if the piece had not been temporary?

SH: For us, it is not temporary. None of us ever thought it was temporary,

VA: From the beginning, what interested both of us, was not a project that was "for" Storefront or "about" Storefront but a project that could, in fact, change Storefront -- that would provide a new use for Storefront.

CG: You were working to contribute a new identity for Storefront?

SH: We thought that Storefront would be transformable.

The next person coming along would cut into it and transform it, and so it goes on.

VA: We had in mind that this is a gallery space, a space where people were going to have shows. We wanted to provide something that other people could tie into, that other people could adjust or adjust to. We wanted to make -- the way I saw it -- the ultimately adaptable space.

CG: What is the importance of light and dark, in the project, or open and close?

SH: Open and close is very important. This project should have opened in late summer, rather than late fall. We did not reach a decision until eight months into the process. We have a concept and a structure for something which is opening at the wrong time of year. A building has two lives; for example, I went to the Temple Ryoan-ji in the winter but then, I went again in the summer and it was a different place. All the screens were open and you could see through to the different courtyards. It was hot and you could hear the crickets. The architecture changed -- it was wide open.

CG: The beauty of this project is that it will be up for the summer and the spring, and so you will be able to have those multiple experiences.

Here is a question for Steven: In spending time looking at your work, I would say that you are very concerned with the details: Lighting, windows, door knobs etc. In this project you had a hands-off approach to the details and let the detail work be done by the contractor. Vito, who one would have thought less concerned with detailing, was very interested in precision. His hand was involved in all phases of the design process. Is this the customary way that each of you work?

SH: No, this is not how I usually work, but there was no budget and I realized that I would not be able to do the details. To make the collaboration work, I decided to stay away from drawing details.

CG: But don't you think that affected the collaboration?

SH: No, I don't think so. Anyone would guess that Vito had the idea and I did all the detailing. It has turned out to be something quite different from his work and my work.

CG: The collaboration proved to be the opposite of what any of us could have imagined. There was role reversal, on both of your parts, which is the challenge and certainly the fascinating point of the collaboration.

SH: I often use a proportioning system in my work. At a certain moment you calculate a golden section to proportion the space. Vito had a system of his own and all the proportioning is Vito's. He had this module; I hadn't known that he worked with a module before but he said it has to be 7 feet two inches. Suddenly, I found myself completely silenced on the subject of proportions. The proportions are not mine, they are all Vito's proportions, because I couldn't impose, because it was a collaboration.

VA: But, it was a collaboration. If you had one system and I had another, then neither one of us should have given in. One system should have bumped against the other, resulting in a third system.

SH: Our ideas are wildly different from one another. What I don't know is -- how he has those ideas? When commenting on the Helsinki project Vito said so many things which supported my work but, when we tried to work together, it was a complete collision course.

VA: Part of the problem was the stress put on facade. The idea of putting a skin on a building didn't interest either of us. Once we started thinking of breaking that skin; once we started thinking of bulges, on either side of that skin, then maybe we got interested.

CG: I never thought that you were asked to do a facade. Initially, Storefront had hoped to change the entire structure. As all of the funding couldn't be raised, the work was reconceived on a smaller scale. The facade was the one element that could bring together the vital issues of public and private. It is the border between them and offers their one point of interception.

SH: I must say, there was pressure in the process -- the funding. You have to come to a decision, and then, it has to be built. If we hadn't had an imposed deadline, I think our head-banging would have gone on for another six months.

CG: Are you saying the project is not resolved, or the struggle is not resolved, or both?

SH: Both, well we'll find out.

(both laughing)

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CG: Vito, where is there no resolution? Are you going to walk by this project and say you don't feel good about this?

VA: I Hope I feel good about it. My hesitation is: The final design might have been, not so much a resolution, but a resignation. Maybe the problem is: since the idea is one of adaptation, it's impossible to decide what final design to adapt to.

CG: Do you think it was because the concept was not resolved; that "the concept drives an idea?"

SH: No, we went through about 50 different ideas, from a collapsing wall, to everything else. This idea of the facade, that opens out and creates a collision between the sidewalk and the

interior, and then there is no facade; no storefront; no art; no architecture. That was an idea that could be developed It isn't that the idea is not there, rather, our collision course. Have you ever been stuck in a revolving door? You get in, and the other gets in, and you both keep spinning. You can never get to the other person, you just keep seeing them go by.

VA: It would be useful to trace how one idea followed the other. I don't think I can say "how one idea led to another," because this didn't happen.

SH: In fact, we got into a cycle where ideas were canceling each other.

VA: I thought I was playing off an idea of yours, and you thought you were playing off an idea of mine. Instead of expanding the idea, we redirected it.

Vito, in your interview with Richard Prince, he asks you what you live for and you answered: "If I can't change the world, then, maybe, I can at least change something about the space in the world, the instruments of the world. What keeps me living is this: The idea that I might provide some kind of situation that makes people do a double take, that nudges people out of certainty and assumption of power, some kind of solution that might make people walk differently."

Has this project at Storefront strengthened your convictions about giving people a new way of seeing and understanding?

VA: The theory of a project is very different from the experience of a project. I can't know anything about the experience of a project until it's built, until it's there, until people use it. Until then, I can only have a theory of the space, and maybe the theory of people.

CG: What is your theory of the space?

VA: The given is that this is a gallery space, a space used for architecture/art exhibitions. I wanted to take, very literally, the notion that this was a space adjustable to different shows; different needs people might have when putting a show together. Therefore, this gallery should never have a finished space. In general, when I do a project, I want to set up a general structure -- but then, particular incidents can change according to particular people, particular times, particular history and news. I can provide only a master plan, a conjecture.

SH: In that regard, this project has two extremes; totally closed, and totally open. Everything inbetween makes it interesting. The project can not be conveyed by a single image. What is interesting is how it is in its different positions. If it is closed it is a wall with lines on it. When it is open, the outside is inside and the inside is outside. If it is nighttime, the light from the interior spills out on the street. We are providing an instrument to do something with, to play with.

VA: We've provided, I hope, the potential of spaces, rather than an actual space. That's the best thing about the project -- maybe that's the only thing the project is.

CG: Steven, if I may quote from your book *Anchoring*. "Architecture is bound to a situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film and literature, a construction (non mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation." Is the Storefront project a physical and metaphysical foundation for 1993 on the Lower East Side's Kenmare Street?

SH: Absolutely. When you open those south facing doors in the spring, the sun is coming into the space. The people on Kenmare Street -- who may have never been in an art gallery before, might suddenly find themselves looking or even walking inside. The facade is the ghost of the idea that Vito had; the extension of the sidewalk into a vertical wall. We said earlier that none of us are entirely satisfied, maybe that is because our aspirations are so high.

CG: Are you talking about fear?

SH: No, not fear, but ambition. Ambition is what drives work; it is what I enjoy. I want to improve X or Y; I want to keep this moving -- to get better. The worst thing that can happen for an architect, in development, is to have someone say "time is up, it has to be built now." That happened with this project. The tragedy of the project is that it could not go on.

VA: One thing that confuses me about the theory of the project is: Who moves these walls anyway? People from the street? Artists/architects having a show? Gallery Directors? We might have set up a structure of instrumentation but whose hands is the instrument in?

CG: It is in the hand of everyone who perceives or interacts with the space. From the person walking down Kenmare Street, who takes a quick look, to the kid who comes in to take a piss inside. You have created a gallery that lets the viewer create and change the space.

VA: If this had opened in the summer there could be a different space everyday.

SH: Actually, to get distance on the process, gives one a better perspective on the possibilities of the piece. This may be a lot better than we are thinking. We got so discouraged.

VA: I was very excited and then I got very depressed and discouraged; but then I got excited again, and then depressed etc.

CG: Will you collaborate again?

(Vito and Steven in unison: Laughing.)
Not right away, no way.

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1. It was Shrin Neshat, co-director of Storefront who invited Vito and Steven to work on a project together.